

Written Testimony in Support of HB 6517

My name is Shaleighne Fahey Cantner, I live in Old Lyme and two of my three children are diagnosed with learning disabilities. One has a diagnosis of dyslexia. I am a former special education teacher for Birth to Three and preschool aged children.

When my oldest son was in Kindergarten, he was identified with needing intervention for literacy skills. He continued with this intervention for two years, without making significant progress in Oral Reading Fluency skills. At the beginning of second grade, I noted the lack of progress and my intention to request a Special Education evaluation at the beginning of the school year. I was encouraged to wait and see how his intervention would go, the typical advice of waiting until closer to third grade. On January 1st of 2020, I requested a Special Education evaluation for my son. He was not making progress on Oral Reading Fluency, and we watched how he struggled and became frustrated with himself. We suspected dyslexia due to family history. When the PPT met again, he was denied Special Education services. I was stunned. It was clear that the team saw his struggles, but his testing showed an intelligent child (IQ 120) with relatively low working memory and very low oral reading fluency-not enough for him to receive special education.

The school team agreed to continue intervention with more intensity and frequency, but no one could decide exactly what the right course of action was to help him improve, even the district reading specialist and the special education teacher. The final meeting held on this was March 13, 2020. Then the world shut down, and so did my child. He struggled his way through the end of Second Grade distance learning. He shouted that he could not read the directions on his assignments, and that "no one had explained this to him!". I watched as my smart but frustrated son slowed his progress in reading. By the end of the year, his Oral Reading Fluency had dropped from 14th percentile to 8th percentile.

I sought my own professional network and outside evaluators for assistance. I consulted with a Dyslexia Specialist, who wanted to run another battery of tests and charge over \$3,000 to provide a full assessment and report. Alternatively, she suggested that the battery of tests that the school district had conducted were not sufficient to conclude if dyslexia was present. On the last day of school in 2020, we met again as a PPT. I requested additional specific tests as recommended by the outside Dyslexia Specialist. Those tests were conducted at the beginning of this school year. The results overwhelmingly showed that my son met the criteria for Specific Learning Disability in Reading and Dyslexia.

Finally, we have a diagnosis, and a program that is helping him to make progress in oral reading fluency and other literacy skills. We have accommodations in place so that he may listen to books and have more time to complete assessments. My husband and I are paying for a private tutor to supplement this. However, I still wonder if it was too late. He calls himself "not that smart", and is routinely frustrated when asked to read.

Our family supports HB 6517 because with these measures, teachers and reading specialists would have more training to identify dyslexia at an earlier age, and provide the appropriate interventions BEFORE children start to fail. These measures would also help families avoid the overwhelming cost of outside evaluations, tutors, private school placements. Families are being routinely burdened with proving that their children need help and a proper diagnosis. The burden should not be on families. As an early childhood educator and consultant, I preach early identification and intervention. It saves so much valuable time and resources when we invest in early intervention. Early identification of dyslexia is NO DIFFERENT than identifying a child who has a speech delay or motor impairment.

While I am frustrated with my experience, I know that my son's teachers must be frustrated too. What if they had more training? What if they knew which tests to conduct to identify him earlier? As a former teacher myself, I remember that I would routinely request training on various topics so that I could better serve my students. We must do better for our teachers. We need to give them the tools to do their jobs.

Thank you for taking the time to read this testimony. I urge you to support HB 6517.

Sincerely,

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